

# AMA Pushes Ethics Guidelines About Gifts

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Wednesday, August 29, 2001; 2:00 PM

The American Medical Association is mounting a new educational campaign costing \$1 million to educate doctors about its ethical guidelines against accepting gifts from drug companies – but most of the funding for the effort is coming from drug companies.

Nine large pharmaceutical companies are contributing a total of about \$675,000 to help pay for the campaign, which is aimed at medical students, physicians-in-training and drug company sales representatives as well as practicing doctors, said Alan R. Nelson, a former AMA president and a special adviser to the American College of Physicians.

Nelson defended the AMA's decision to accept grants from the drug industry to publicize the ethical guidelines, which allow company funding of educational conferences but advise doctors against accepting gifts of more than minimal value from drug companies.

"The idea that somehow that money is tainted is not accurate in my view," he said. "This is a legitimate education program that should benefit the public."

But some consumer advocates criticized the AMA move. "They're certainly not exactly going to encourage doctors to adhere to [the guidelines] when they're setting this kind of example," said Sidney M. Wolfe, director of Public Citizen's Health Research Group. "The campaign is not going to have any credibility."

Wolfe said the AMA guidelines were originally issued in 1992 in response to public concern over marketing practices in which drug companies often treated doctors to expensive gifts, dinners, trips or cash payments.

Since then, he said, companies have partially cut back on such practices but still commonly provide doctors with free drug samples, pens, notepads and other gifts. Wolfe said there is considerable evidence that accepting gifts from drug companies influences doctors' prescribing patterns.

In recent years, overall spending by the pharmaceutical industry on marketing has greatly increased. Last year, drug companies spent almost \$16 billion on marketing, including about \$4 billion to promote drugs to doctors in their offices, according to IMS Health, which collects data for the industry.

Prescription drug costs have become the fastest-growing fraction of the nation's health care spending, with newer, more expensive brand-name drugs fueling much of the increase. Many observers say that aggressive marketing of new drugs to doctors and patients is partly responsible.

The companies contributing to the education campaign are AstraZeneca International, Bayer Corp., Eli Lilly and Co., Glaxo SmithKline, Merck & Co., Inc., Pfizer Inc., Pharmacia Corp., Procter and Gamble Pharmaceuticals and Wyeth-Ayerst Laboratories. Nelson said most companies contributed about \$50,000 each but some contributed almost \$100,000. The AMA contributed \$50,000 plus the time of various staffers, he said.

The money helped to pay for 5,000 educational kits to be used to teach doctors, medical students and drug company sales representatives about the ethical guidelines, as well as a new AMA website on the topic, Nelson added.

Jeff Trehwitt, a spokesman for the Pharmaceutical Research and Manufacturers of America, said two staffers from his organization also worked on the effort. A number of physicians' groups in addition to the AMA also provided input.

"The goal . . . was to set up a good, comprehensive educational campaign that is going to make it so that new young doctors and new young sales representatives know about these guidelines," Trewhitt said.

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